

# THE AMERICAN FARMER RETURNS

BY HENRY L. BOURDIN AND STANLEY T. WILLIAMS

WHEN, in 1779, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur returned to the little port of New York to embark for his native France, he was still a poor man. During his twenty years in America he had served in the Canadian army; he had wandered through the Colonies; and he had lived at "Pine Hill", in Orange County, New York, as "The American Farmer". Poor he was, this eighteenth century adventurer, but we fancy that he watched carefully, as he boarded ship, a certain trunk. In it were manuscripts, the records of his Odyssey. The book made from some of these manuscripts you have read, if you are a lover of old, curious volumes. In the trunk, in their most primitive form were the *Letters from an American Farmer*.

Whether Crèvecoeur, once on the high seas, exchanged experiences with his fellow-passengers, we do not know. A few months later, however—this we do know—he was taking counsel of the London publishers, Thomas Davies and Lockyer Davis, for the publication of his intimate journals of American pioneer life. Three years later (in 1782) the book appeared. Crèvecoeur was now back in France, and prosperous. The vigorous "Farmer" has given place, in later life, to the successful Frenchman, living in Paris, and again in New York, as Consul. He has become the friend of Madame D'Houdetot, and a member of her aristocratic circle. Does he recall those winter nights in the Mohawk Valley when he peered out into the darkness of the snowstorm? When he returned to the fireside for his wife's mug of gingered cider?

The world at least, in France, in England and America, learned to love the story of the "American Farmer". In 1784 there were four editions of his book in Britain. In 1785 he brought out a free translation, the *Lettres d'un Cultivateur Americain*: and in 1793 Mathew Carey was godfather to the first American edition. Such fame must have pleased this born letter-writer. Yet, even

more, if he could have known the life of the nineteenth century, he might have seen reader after reader "discover" him, and delight in his stories of Martha's Vineyard; in the battle of the snakes; in the manly essay, *What is an American?* "Oh! tell Hazlitt," wrote Charles Lamb on November 10, 1805, "not to forget to send the American Farmer." In 1829 Hazlitt is still fond of the Farmer, for he speaks of him in *The Edinburgh Review* as one who "gives not only the subject, but the feelings of a new country." Yes, the world has accepted the *Letters from an American Farmer*. There they are in pocket-size on most of our shelves.

Meanwhile, what of the old trunk and the manuscripts? No one ever saw that manuscript which the London publisher used in 1782. Nor, what was more strange, did anyone ever behold either in manuscript or print, the rest of the Farmer's records. Were they lost? Yet Crèvecoeur had meant to publish them, for an unobtrusive note in the edition of 1782 vouchsafed: "Should our Farmer's Letters be found to afford matter of useful entertainment to an intelligent and candid public, a second volume, equally interesting with those now published, may soon be expected." The second volume was not published, and the reasons, however attractive for speculation, we may not pause to examine. Rather we must hasten to an evening one hundred and forty years later. On this evening in a château, near Saumur, that trunk of the Farmer's was discovered by one of the writers of this narrative. There, wrapped in their eighteenth century coverings, he found the manuscripts. Outside the moon shone down on the Loire, as within he read by candle-light, the night through, the unpublished letters of the American Farmer.

They were indeed, as Crèvecoeur had said, "equally interesting with those now published." In them were treasures for the scholar: the first specimens of Crèvecoeur's handwriting, carrying with them the first opportunities for study of the diction and spelling of this eighteenth century Frenchman, who had been educated for a time in England, and who had lived for more than a score of years in America. Here were four realistic letters about farm life to dispose of the myth that Crèvecoeur was a Rousseauistic dreamer. Here were passages from our "eighteenth century Thoreau", as delightful as those in the earlier

volume on the bees and the birds. "A Description", writes Crèvecoeur, with characteristic spelling, "of 2 Species of Aunts in Virginia." Most charming, here was a prose *Snow-Bound*, with its delicate portraiture of the approach of the storm. Finally, there were new narratives of border-life: *The Frontier-Woman* and *The History of Mrs. B.* were not less stirring episodes than the old tales of Mary Rowlandson.

But we must let the Farmer speak for himself, speak of his own life as he never did in the earlier letters. He loves to withdraw from the routine of the farm, and write of his experiences. Yet when his wife surprises him at this, he "blushes". "There is", he says, "something truly ridiculous in a farmer quitting his Plough or his axe, and then flying to his pen . . . My wife herself who has never seen me handle the pen so much in all my life, helps to confound me. She laughs at my 'folly'." Yet writing (or drawing his sketches) was essential for Crèvecoeur, who with all his crudities had the tastes of an artist. He must describe the curses of his life: the wolves, the caterpillars, and skunks; or how ingeniously he makes the family carriage. More gladly, however, he dwells on the "bees" and "simple Merriments" when the farmers' wives come together. "Poor as we are, if we have not the Gorgeous balls, the Harmonious concerts the shrill horn of Europa, yet we dilate our hearts as well with the simple Negro fiddle, with our Rum & water as you do with your delicious wines."

Such social pleasures indeed make the American's home life more cheerful, Crèvecoeur would have us think, than the European's: "It is in the art of our Simple Cookery that our wives all aim at distinguishing themselves; this is famous for one thing, that for another. She who has not fresh Comb Honey, Some Sweet Meats of her own composing Smoke beef at Tea would be Looked upon as very Inexpert indeed . . . Thus going to drink Tea with Each other implies several very agreeable Ideas, that of Riding sometimes 5 or 6 miles, that of chatting much hearing the News of the County that of eating harty." For all such joys the Farmer gallantly thanks his wife, one Mehetable Tippet of Yonkers. "No one in America," he declares, forgets "what an useful acquisition a good wife is to an Am. Farmer how Small is his chance of prosperity if he draws a blank in that Lottery."

Even in the winter the cheerful parties continue. "It is the Season," says Crèvecoeur, "that the Hospitality of the Americans is most conspicuous." Then follows a vignette of an old Colonial custom: "The severity of the climate requires that all our doors shou'd be open'd to the frozen traveller. Indeed we shut them not either by Night or by day at any Time of the year. The traveller when cold has a right to stop to warm himself at the first house he sees, he freely goes to the fire, which is kept burning all night, there he forgets the keenness of the cold, he smokes his Pipe, drinks the Cyder which is often left on the Harth and departs in Peace. We allways sleep in these rooms, at least I do and have often seen mine full when I was in my bed. On waking I have Sometimes spoke to them, at other times it was a Silent Meeting . . . Far from being uneasy at seeing my house thus filled while my wife and I are abed I think it on the contrary a great compliment, when I consider that by thus stopping they convince me that they have thought my House and my fire better than that of my Neighbors."

On another evening, this time on the actual frontier (in *Reflections on the Manners of the Americans*), we see a family together. Again it is winter: "The great Fire warms the whole House, cheers all the Family, it makes them think less of the Severity of the Season, he Hugges himself with an Involuntary feeling, he is conscious of present ease & security, he hears the great snow storm roaring in his Chemney.—If he regrets his antient connections, The Mugg of Cyder & other conveniencies he enjoy'd before, he finds himself amply remunerated by the Plenty of fewel he now possesses &c. The Rosy children setting round the Harth, Sweats & sleeps with their Basons of Sappan on their Laps, the Industrious Mother is rattling at her Loom, avaritiously Improving every Minute of her Time."

These winter-pieces are very different from the pastorals (already published) of the Farmer ploughing in the clear sunshine of his farm, as his wife knits sitting near him in the shade of the trees. Yet they are not so different as many of the harshly realistic pictures of frontier life which, for some reason were crowded into the two lost volumes. Such cannot be quoted here,—we are interested chiefly in the farmer's cheerful routine,—

but later one story of the frontier shall be repeated. It sometimes seems as if the Farmer were happier, at least in these two volumes, in his description of winter, than in those of the countryside in softer moods. He is now describing a snow-storm in the Mohawk Valley. He begins:

The wind, which is a great regulator of the weather, shifts to the North East, the air becomes bleak and then intensely cold, the light of the sun becomes dimm'd as if an eclipse had happened, a general night seems coming on. At last imperceptible atoms make their appearance, they are few and descend slowly; a sure prognostick of a great snow.—Little or no wind is yet felt.—By degrees the number as well as the size of those white particles is increased, they descend in larger fleaks, a distant wind is heard, the noise swells and seems to advance, the new element at last appears and overspreads everything. In a little time the heavy clouds seem to approach nearer the earth and discharge a winged flood driving along towards the South West, howling at every door, roaring in every chimney, whistling with asperous sound through the naked limbs of the trees: those are the shrill notes which mark the weight of the storm. Still the storm increases as the night approaches, and its great obscurity greatly add to the solemnity of the scene. Sometimes the snow is preceded by melted hail which like a shining varnish covers and adorns the whole surface of the earth, of buildings and trees; an hurtful time for the cattle which it chills and oppresses. Mournful and solitary they retire to what shelter they can get, and forgetting to eat, they wait with instinctive patience untill the Storm is over. How amazingly changed is the aspect of Nature!

Such pictures of colonial life the old trunk contained. If they reveal Crèvecoeur as strange in spelling and diction, they also suggest his keen observation, and, what is more interesting, his literary taste. In these last passages are strength and repose, and in the others not reproduced here delicacy of expression and a fine gift of metaphor. Less obviously, however, the Farmer, in these new letters, displays his sense of the dramatic, a quality apparent in that earlier passage on the negro in the cage or in the description of the battle of the snakes. Crèvecoeur loves a good story, and it is certain that he often relates in the first person what he has heard at someone's fireside. He depicts, for example, unforgettably, scenes in the retreat through the wilderness after the Wyoming Massacre; a silhouette of a beast of burden with the bedding on its back as a saddle. "On it sat a wretched mother with a child at her breast, and two more placed behind her."

One adventure may stand for this other side of the Farmer's life and for his power to show something more in colonial life than tranquil life about a winter fireside. In *The Frontier Woman* he writes, relating in the first person a story that he has heard:

In an excursion which we made to . . . , our party consisted of 23: 5 white people and 18 Indians of the very worst class. We came close to the woods of the settlement about sun down, but perceived nobody in the fields; We concluded that the people had returned to their houses of which we counted nine. We divided ourselves in as many companies so that every house was to be entered at once at the signal of a gun. God forbid that I should tell you the history of that attack where there was so much innocent blood shed. I entered that which had fell to my lot, and the first object I perceived was a woman of comely aspect, neat and clean. She was suckling two children whilst at the same time she was rocking a third in a cradle. At the sight of me who was painted and dressed like an Indian, she suddenly arose and came towards the door, "I know your errand", she said. "Begin with those innocents that they may not languish and die with hunger when I am gone. Dispatch me as you have dispatched my poor aged father and my husband last April. I am tired of life." So saying, with her right hand she boldly pulled the handkerchief from her breast, whilst she still held her two infants with her left, and presented it to me bare. I was armed with my tomahawk and was going to strike when a sudden and irresistible impulse prevented me. "Good woman, why should I kill you", I told her, "if your husband and father are already dead you have suffered enough; God help you."—"Strike", she said, "and don't be faint-hearted. You are only mocking God and man; the rest of your gang will soon be here, this will only serve to prolong my misery. Hark! Hark! the butchers, the villains; hark the shrieks of my poor cousin Susy in the next house. Gracious God, why hath thou thus abandon'd me?"

After all, we may be glad that the old trunk survived the shipwreck on the way home to France in 1779, and perhaps not sorry that Crèvecoeur left the two volumes there. He comes back to us again now so vividly—a plain, strong man, with wisdom, not untouched by romance. His sketches of colonial life he says, rather humbly, are "genuine copies." They are. He is one of those Americans, one of the first, who could plough a field or fight an enemy—and later give it permanence in literature.

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## BOOK AND CROWNS

BY ROBERT P. TRISTRAM COFFIN

THE coat of arms of Oxford, if only there were some of the old metaphysical men of the seventeenth century around to explain it, has rare symbolism in its book and tripled crowns. John Donne was the man who could have done it, Donne the Oxonian wit, soldier, poet, adventurer, satirist, diplomat, scholar, religious controversialist, Dean of St. Paul's, and greatest preacher of his day, who crowded ten great men's lives into his years between leaving Oxford degreeless but Roman Catholic still and filling the space about Paul's Cross with so many worshippers of his Protestant eloquence that many were taken out for dead. Donne could see the metaphysics of all things, from the royal James who forced him into the Church, to leaf gold and grave worms. He even catechized himself for death by the marble symbol of his dissolution, his own shrouded corpse. And he had gone to the wars and lived in great courts and read "the whole of Divinity"; so he would have been eminently fitted to appreciate the Oxford teachers of today who are walking symbols of the University seal in their living.

The learning that goes crowned. These latter day Donnes have something of the crown about them, a certain magnificent gesture of the old kings. They, too, are many of them men who have lived richly, who have put off gowns and gone into the tanks and airplanes of their wars, sat in the seats of the Empire and rubbed elbows with great statesmen, been great poets, or at least skated over Holland in the Michaelmas vacation or climbed the Finsteraarhorn in the summer. They are kingly, whether they go in gold or gray. The ones who lecture on sweepings from philological dust heaps have that rare Mediæval faculty of being as dull as their discourse; they act the Scholiast in a wholehearted way. Those of them who run after the abstruser philosophies are as serene as sanctified monks in a Mediæval illuminated book, as